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Subject: Fw: Anchorage Press: Politicizing Pebble

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"To protect your rivers, protect your mountains."

----- Forwarded by Phil North/R10/USEPA/US on 09/15/2011 10:21 AM -----

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Politicizing Pebble

By Mike Dingman | Posted: Wednesday, September 14, 2011 3:30 pm

It seems everything in Alaska becomes political, and most issues find knee-jerk support or opposition from each of the very vocal extremes. If someone asked the governor what he had for breakfast, one group would be completely supportive of that breakfast and another group would come out and deem it an abomination. The legislature would create a blue ribbon panel and up would spring APOC-registered interest groups on both side of the issue creating jobs for literally tens of Alaskans - the grey areas lost in the war between black and white. That seems to be what has happened to the Pebble Mine project - a project that has not yet even reached the permitting stage.

Had the political fervor over the proposed Pebble Mine happened this early in the process anywhere else, people would be bewildered by the massive vitriol and mudslinging prior to there even being a plan on which to form an opinion. Ask anybody you know how they feel about Pebble Mine and almost every one of them will have an opinion one way or another. Then ask them how the permitting process works, and where, exactly, Pebble is in that process. It is doubtful that any of them will have an informed answer.

However, this is Alaska, and attacking those on the opposite side and making decisions based on ideology and the agendas of politicians rather than on the merits of the issue seem to be the norm. Alaska hasn't seen a project on the scale of the Pebble project since the design and construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline in the 1970s. The concept of a copper and gold mine in the Bristol Bay region however, is not a new one. The discovery was originally made by a Canadian mining company, Cominco Ltd., in 1988. Only in recent years has the same discovery - with a new suitor - created such controversy. Bristol Bay Region

Flying around the Bristol Bay region the first thing you notice is the sheer beauty of the land. The vast untouched wilderness spreads in every direction as you look down upon it. The crystal-clear waters and

braided streams intermingle with the seemingly untouched tundra; so picturesque it's almost impossible to believe that it's real.

The Bristol Bay Borough is Alaska's first borough, incorporated in 1962. It is also, reportedly, home to the world's largest sockeye salmon fishery as well as many other species of salmon. It's a popular resort location with many lodges and fishing charters in the surrounding villages. The area is also home to Katmai National Park - a popular tourist destination - as well as Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, Aniakchak National Monument, Wood-Tikchik State Park (the largest state park in the U.S.), Becharof National Wildlife Refuge, McNeil State Game Refuge, Egegik State Critical Habitat Area, Pilot Point State Critical Habitat Area, Maritime National Wildlife Refuge and Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary. Alaska's largest lake (and the eighth largest in the country) - Lake Iliamna - calls the Bristol Bay region home. The lake is 77 miles long and in parts it is 22 miles wide, reaching depths of nearly 1,000 feet. It has been a popular fishing destination for Alaskans and tourists for hundreds of years. Many locals also think that it is home to the Iliamna Lake Monster - and their claims have drawn national interest, including an Animal Planet documentary crew.

Pebble Beach

The deposit now known as "Pebble West" was originally nicknamed "Pebble Beach" because of its distinctive terrain. Flying overhead the glaringly obvious color abnormalities in the ground are the reason that Cominco geologists were first spurred to explore the area for copper deposits.

The best way to think of the geography around the Pebble deposit is to picture a triangle. On one point of the triangle is the village of Nondalton, on another is the village of Iliamna and the third is the Pebble deposit. Each leg of the triangle spans about 15 miles as the crow flies. Directly to the south of the Pebble deposit is Frying Pan Lake, named for its distinctive shape. The lake is about a mile long, up to half a mile wide, and averages a fairly consistent three feet deep.

Cominco did some exploratory drilling and some other efforts in the area, but never pushed past the pre-permitting exploratory process because of the low price of copper at the time. Cominco sold the lease rights to the property in 2001 to Northern Dynasty Minerals, which did quite a bit of work on its own and then entered into a partnership with Anglo-American PLC and created the Pebble Partnership in 2007. It was then a much more serious effort to aggressively continue the exploration project - still in progress - was launched.

The deposit itself is estimated to have 107 million ounces of gold, 80 million ounces of copper and 5.6 billion pounds of molybdenum, an element with an extremely high melting point used in high-strength steel alloys. According to Pebble's website there are also commercially significant amounts of silver, rhenium and palladium.

The Process

The problem with the extreme politicization of the Pebble project over the last few years is the lack of concrete facts to make specific claims about the theoretical damage Pebble Mine will cause. The project is in the exploratory pre-permitting stage. There have not even been permanent plans set for the type of mining that will be done, nor the manner in which the mining will be conducted.

The pre-permitting stage is the earliest stage of mine development. It begins with exploration and discovery - which Cominco Ltd. did in 1988. After discovery there are pre-feasibility studies and then feasibility studies. Ongoing with, and following the feasibility stage, is the permitting stage. The permitting stage is ordinarily when there is a first chance for the public to weigh in. (Because of the outcry over the Pebble Project there has been quite a bit of early public input in the process.)

During the permitting phase the public is invited in for testimony and input on numerous occasions, and the public is first provided copies of the actual plan. (In the case of Pebble, the Pebble Partnership has made a commitment to roll out its plan in the region before entering permitting. Pebble claims it's the first time this has ever been done.) In this particular case, at least 67 state, federal and local permits will be required prior to construction and operation. Unfortunately, in Alaska, litigation often accompanies the permitting phase, and there is practically no doubt this will be the case with Pebble.

After permitting (and resolution of the courtroom dramas), construction of the mine facilities can actually begin. After the facilities are constructed the operation of the mine begins, with reclamation running concurrently with the operations of the mine. Finally, when the mine operation is complete, the mining company finishes reclaiming the land and closes the project.

Environmental Studies

The folks at the Pebble Partnership feel completely comfortable claiming that they are undertaking the most extensive environmental study for a mining claim in the history of Alaska. They will also tell you it is

one of the most - if not the most - extensive environmental studies program for any project in Alaska's history.

Pebble has hired more than 40 consultants who employ more than 100 people to provide environmental studies on the area surrounding the Pebble deposit. In total they have spent more than \$120 million on the environmental program alone. They are studying a 250,000 acre area, which is ten times the size of the projected footprint area for their project.

The studies include fish abundance surveys, water balance studies and aerial spawning studies, among others. Due to flooding in the area during the time when the snow melts - the season we know as "break-up" - they are also conducting extensive studies on the habitation of fish in "off-channel" areas, where the fish are relocated during these floods.

The Opposition

The opposition to the mine is as varied as the support for the mine. As with any development project there are those who are just opposed to development. However, this project is large enough to garner opposition from a geographically and ideologically diverse group of people.

Within the region over the years it seems there's been little support for the project. In 2005 the Alaska Inter-Tribal Council passed a resolution in opposition to the development of Pebble Mine. In 2009 The Bristol Bay Native Corporation followed suit and passed a similar resolution. Also a 2009 Craciun Research poll commissioned by Nunamta Aulukestai - a group of eight different village corporations - showed dramatic opposition to Pebble Mine.

Complaints by critics of the projects run the gambit between environmental concerns and simple opposition to such a large development in their area. Opponents claim that the Pebble Mine would be right at the headwaters of Bristol Bay. They fear that the waste from this type of mine in particular would cause an inexcusable risk to the fish in the area, would cost thousands fishing jobs in the area, and irreparably damage the environment forever.

The Lodge Owner

And then there's Bob Gillam...

Bob Gillam is a self-made billionaire who owns hunting and fishing lodge along the banks of Lake Clark. He has funded a significant portion of the anti-Pebble movement's campaigns and seems to be the axis point for all the controversy. Nobody knows for sure how much money he has dedicated to his efforts to stop Pebble, but he has been quoted as saying that he has dedicated "millions."

Gillam argues that the mine would endanger 7,000 jobs. He claims that in an area ripe with earthquakes, high winds and potential for other natural disasters, the project is far too risky. He says that toxins from the mining waste will endanger salmon and that when Pebble is gone, he's concerned that they will leave behind waste and "the largest earthen dam in the world."

Gillam's critics say that he fails to provide any facts to back up his rhetoric. They claim that he dislikes Pebble because it will effect his hunting and fishing lodge, and not over any real concern for the environment. They point to the fact that he faced the largest Alaska Public Offices Commission fine in the state campaign watchdog agency's history. (Some will try to argue semantics and claim that because the payment was due to a settlement and is not "technically" a fine.)

Gillam and others opposed to Pebble Mine recount the history of other mines around the country where the land was never reclaimed, irreparable damage was done to lakes and streams, and they claim that this is a very real threat in Bristol Bay. They worry that the mining company will come in, make billions of dollars in profits, damage the land and leave when there is nothing left to take.

The Controversy

As mentioned earlier, when you fly over the area of the Pebble deposit, the first thing you notice is the breathtaking beauty of the area. It literally captures your soul as you fly over the magnificent area where the deposit sits. Now, imagine as you take in that breathtakingly beautiful scene - all of a sudden - you come across drilling machinery opening up a gaping 4,000 to 6,000 foot deep hole right in the middle of the valley: This is where the controversy begins.

However it doesn't end there. The Pebble problem is far more complex. As mentioned earlier, the Bristol Bay region is home to the largest sockeye fishery in the world and home to world-class sport and commercial fishing. The Pebble deposit sits in the heart of the watershed for these areas.

There is growing concern that wastewater from the mine will damage Bristol Bay fisheries - in particular Lake Clark and Lake Iliamna. The people at Pebble will tell you Pebble drains into streams that represent about one percent of the total Bristol Bay watershed. There are eight huge rivers pouring in to Bristol Bay and literally thousands of tributaries the size of those at Pebble that feed those rivers.

Recently there has been no clear consensus showing support or lack thereof for the Pebble Mine project; however, there will be a local ballot initiative to be voted on October 4, which will give a clearer picture of residents' opinion. (The results of the outcome of that election are sure to eventually be in the hands of the Alaska Supreme Court, but the vote totals should give an idea of where those in the region stand on the mine's development.)

What's Next

The Pebble Partnership will continue to work its way through the process. Interest groups from both sides will continue to make outrageous claims and exaggerate the truth. There is a lot of truth and a lot of hyperbolic rhetoric on both ends of the spectrum.

If the project survives the permitting process and enters construction, there will likely be tremendous economic benefits for the Bristol Bay region. Pebble estimates 2,000 construction jobs and 1,000 operating jobs, and it claims to be aiming for a 60 percent hire rate within the region. For an economically depressed region on a historically consistent gradual decline, this would definitely boost the local economy.

However, along with the potential good come tremendous risks. The region is the largest sockeye salmon fishery in the world - there is almost no arguing that. The fisheries provide very high paying seasonal employment and provide a resource that would be irreplaceable if destroyed. The Pebble deposit is in a precarious position, right in the middle of the watersheds for these fisheries. The impact that the mine may have on these waters is still undetermined.

Both sides in this debate should lower the rhetoric, provide the public with the facts as they know them, and let the process work. The state and federal governments have very strict permitting processes in place to try to answer most of these questions. Alaska is a resource development state. The Alaska Constitution requires that Alaska develop its resources for the benefit of all Alaskans. This mandate requires that when a project like Pebble comes along, we do everything we can to study the project and try to understand what is best for "all Alaskans."

Flying from Anchorage to Iliamna with clear skies on the ground, as you climb to the altitude required to cross the Alaska Range, you work through the clouds and turbulence on the way to cruising altitude, where you once again find clear skies above the cloud cover. The politicization of Pebble has put us in the muck of the cloud cover which comes early in the process. Until we climb through that muck, we lack the facts necessary to legitimately make concrete and final decisions about this project. As Alaskans, we should take a step back, look at the bigger picture, and when all the facts are on the table, then make an informed decision about what is best for "All Alaskans."

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